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Kim Philby of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service

THE PHILBY CONSPIRACY. By Bruce Page, Phillip Knightley and David Leitch. Illustrated. Doubleday. 312 pp. $5.95.

By Thomas W. Braden

Aghast, one puts down *The Philby Conspiracy*. The joint product of a team of journalists working for the London *Sunday Times*, it is the most sustained, the most horrifying and the best account of international espionage that has been written, at least since Rebecca West's *The Meaning of Treason*.

The mind searches for reassurance. Finding none, it springs to self-defense. "Thou shalt not bear false witness," it recalls. One would not have known such a man, he could not have been in the circle of one's friends.

But the exercise is fruitless. Kim Philby *was* in the circle of one's friends, not in the close sense of "what friends thou hast and their endurance tried" — he was never that to anyone, not even to his wife — a fact which might go unnoticed only in a secret service where amicable disengagement is also good security. But one had a drink with Philby at the house of friends. Because he was the personification of the alliance, Her Majesty's representative on matters "most secret," one greeted him in the office of the boss rather more cheerily than one might greet a fellow member of "the firm."

One was guarded of course. The boss would raise the subject about which the representative of the British Secret Intelligence Service had a "need to know." Still, one thought that Philby was on friendly terms with all the senior partners, that he had more access to the carefully compartmentalized secrets of the various divisions of the firm than any of the firm's junior executives.

So where does the mind come out? It is at last forced to face an abasing truth: that it is possible for a man to accept from those with whom he walks all that they can give in affection, well-being, education, trust and honor, and in return lie to them, steal from them, betray them, even murder them.

Now, in 1968, after Hiss, after Nunn May, after Fuchs and Blake, after Burgess and Maclean — who play secondary roles in *The Philby Conspiracy* — the case of H. A. R. (Kim) Philby is still shocking.

It is shocking because Philby had none of the weaknesses or oddities which might cause acquaintance to pause on the brink of confidence. He was not a drunk (Maclean) or homosexual (Burgess and Blake). He was not an adolescent egomaniac (Nunn May and Fuchs). He was not even passionate about austerity as Colonel Penkovskiy seemed passionate about luxury. Nor did Philby have any of the excuses by which the sociologist or the psychologist will explain our misbehavior. He was not poor, not deformed, not a member of any group which other groups look upon as inferior.

But Philby is shocking for a more important reason. He is shocking because he grew up in a society which tolerates rebellion, even to some degree respects it. He betrayed this society to another which punishes rebellion with death. It is tempting to compare Philby with Penkovskiy. Both were intelligence officers, though on opposite sides. Both were traitors to their governments. But the temptation must be put aside. Penkovskiy rebelled in favor of conscience; Philby turned over his conscience to anti-conscience.

Philby grew to manhood at Cambridge as a student of economics and history during a time — the Thirties — when economics was not working very well and history seemed (as perhaps it does to the current college generation) to grow gloomier as it came closer. The authors of *The Philby Conspiracy* quote John Maynard Keynes, whose lectures the young Philby must have attended. Keynes deplored the tendency towards Communism among the young of that Cambridge era and attributed it to a "recrudescence of the strain of Puritanism in our blood, the zest to adopt a painful solution because of its painfulness."

But one can find little of the Puritan rebel in any other aspect of Philby's career, at Cambridge or later. Surely this university student who campaigned for Labour with a speech about "the heart of England" beating "not in stately homes but in the factories and on the farms" would also have given thought to the place of the rebel in his society. He would have considered the challenge rebellion creates, or the changes it frequently brings. There is a place for the rebel in a free society. Philby cannot be granted that status. He was a traitor to conscience as well as to state.

So much for the shock imposed by the man. There are two more shocks presented by *The Philby Conspiracy*. Let us take them not in order of importance, but as they come.

The first is the shock of seeing the society of Great Britain as it took Philby and his co-conspirators to its bosom, nurtured them, protected them, drew them closer and refused to repel them in the face of obvious warnings that they were sucking its life blood.

Maclean, let it be repeated, was a drunk. Not merely a man who had one too many too often, but a gutter drunk, an angry, brawling drunk, a drunk found in the morning on the floor of other people's apartments.

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Burgess, as I remember him in Washington, wore fur on his shoes and talked about his "boy friends." But he was not just effeminate. He was a police-blotter homosexual who had an openly avowed fancy for collecting whips.

And Philby? Well, Philby was a model of the circumspect intelligence officer. But he had told a few people at Cambridge and later that he was a member of the Communist party.

Here, it is important to make a distinction between the security services of the two states which fought the war against fascism side by side. It is inconceivable that the United States Government would have employed a drunk of Maclean's public renown or a man who boasted openly of his homosexuality as Burgess did. It is true that there were Communists in the wartime O.S.S. Some of them performed bravely on tasks behind the lines befitting their peculiar allegiance. General Donovan, who headed our wartime intelligence, said he was proud of them, but whenever he said so, he would name their names, thus proving a point. If he missed a few, there was no one then to say him nay.

But that was before 1946. After the Central Intelligence Agency took over from O.S.S. in 1947, it would have been impossible for a Philby to have joined it. Why? Because Philby had joined the Communist party in his youth. No matter that he covered his tracks by feigning sympathy with Hitler and winning a fascist decoration from Franco (in itself enough to bar him from C.I.A.), the Communist record was there.

Yet British security permitted Philby to rise to the rank of No. 3 man in S.I.S. and appointed him chief liaison officer with the C.I.A.

There is no way to explain this stupidity except in terms of Philby's family, Philby's school, Philby's university, Philby's father's membership in the right sort of London club. The authors do an excellent job of explaining what is really inexplicable to an American.

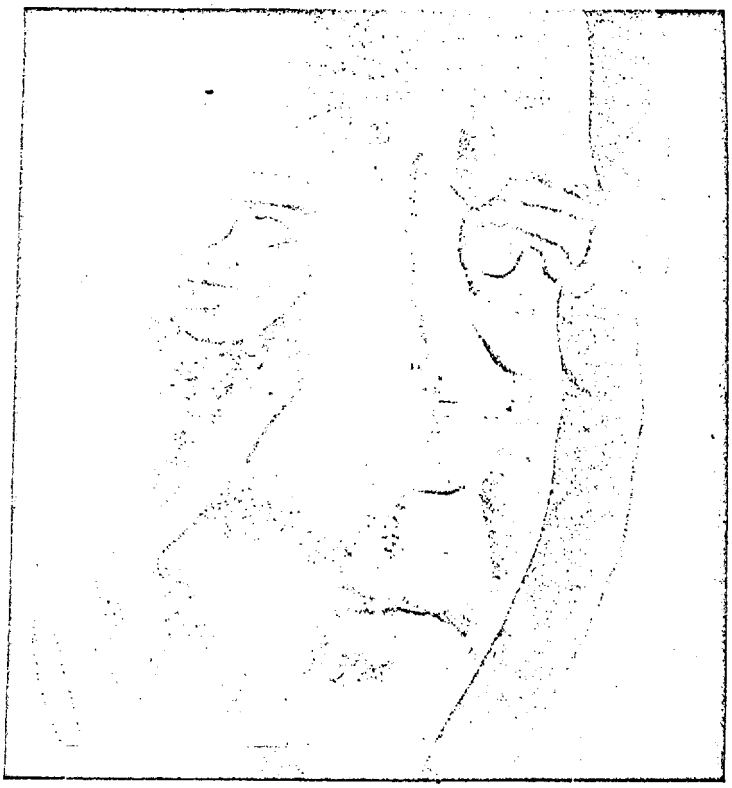
But now comes *The Philby Conspiracy*'s final shock: What good is security within a secret agency if its secrets are imparted to a friendly but penetrated foreign intelligence agency?

The record now shows that America's C.I.A. was badly compromised. At the least, it was compromised between the years 1949, when Philby came to Washington, and mid-1951, when he was recalled. At most, the record could say that the C.I.A. is still compromised.

Philby knew the organization of the Agency. He knew its agents and its operations in the planning stage. Most important, he knew what C.I.A. wanted to know.

To know this is to know a great deal. It would be difficult to decide when time relegates such knowledge to disused filing cabinets. Philby admits, for example, to one crime based upon information he gained in Washington. He admits to the massacre of hundreds of brave Albanians who parachuted into their homeland in the early Fifties, taking part in a joint C.I.A.-S.I.S. operation.

He does not admit to an equally important crime, and the authors do not charge him with it. Nevertheless, in the opinion of this reviewer, it seems probable that Philby gave the Russians the information necessary to put them on the alert. When Gary Powers went down, destroying the summit conference between Eisenhower and Khrushchev, Philby had been gone



from Washington for many years. But he knew what C.I.A. wanted to know. He may still know.

So the damage Philby did to the American intelligence effort is still inestimable. What can be done about it? The authors sum up one side with appalling succinctness: "When the extent of Philby's treachery was finally realized, the C.I.A. had no choice, short of disbanding the whole organization, but to smile bravely and carry on."

Still, by now, a law of diminishing returns must have set in for Philby. His value to the K.G.B., where he goes to work each morning in Moscow, must diminish a little with each passing day.

But we too are subject to a law of diminishing returns. In the days of Philby the intelligence community consisted of a top-level staff and some assistants. Since then, this community — Defense Department Intelligence and C.I.A. — has grown to a vast industry which spends about 2½ billion dollars a year, employs more than 60,000 people and produces an amount of paper which God himself would have difficulty digesting even if He did not already know what the Russians were up to. The growth of our intelligence effort is surely one of the reasons why Philby's value to the Russians must be diminishing. He could not encompass it all.

But can we? How can we make sure that all these [illegible] more people to watch paper and people? The prospect seems as gloomy as the past.